

Frozen Piety

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. Today we're starting a new sermon series. I was waiting for like applause.

Yeah, like there, yeah. We're starting a new sermon series. Over the next few weeks, we are going to be looking at the Lord's Prayer. For those of you unfamiliar, that starts with Our Father in Heaven.

It's the Lord's Prayer. It's the Lord's Prayer from Matthew 6. And so if you want to take out your Bibles, you can journey to Matthew 6. And we don't call it the Lord's Prayer because Jesus prayed it, because Jesus didn't pray this prayer.

We call it the Lord's Prayer because Jesus composed it to show us how to pray. That's why it's called the Lord's Prayer. And so today we're going to be looking at what Jesus said in the four verses leading up to the Lord's Prayer.

So we're going to be listening as Kara reads for us Matthew 6, verses 5 through 8. And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners that they may be seen by others.

[1 : 18] Truly I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

Thank you. Let's pray. Father, it is with fear and trembling that we come before this text. We realize how important prayer is and what a gift it is, and yet we also see that there are warnings against improper prayer.

So Father, we ask that you would guide us by your Spirit to understand this text. Lord, we praise you that not only did Jesus teach us these things, but we have it.

We have it thousands of years later so that we can still learn what you command of us. What a gift this is. Father, help us today and always to lift up your name to honor you with all sincerity.

[2 : 38] In Jesus' name. Amen. It's at this point that Jesus is in the middle of His famous Sermon on the Mount.

He's teaching a large crowd that's gathered around Him at the foot of a mountain. And here, Jesus makes it clear that prayer is an essential part of our relationship with God.

Prayer delights our Father. Did you hear that? Prayer delights our Father. In God's Word, we are told to pray continually.

We're told to present our requests to God. We're told to come boldly to the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace in our time of need.

We're told to cast our burdens on God because He cares for us. Prayer delights our Father. And yet, Jesus, in His kindness, gives us some warnings about prayer habits that do not please God.

[3 : 53] Verse 5. And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners that they may be seen by others.

Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. Ooh, we know it's not good to be called a hypocrite. It's an accusation that you are doing one thing while telling others to do the opposite. But you might find it interesting that the Greek term for hypocrite wasn't always an insult. It was the standard term for a stage actor.

Actors would wear a big mask during a play and they were called hypocrites because underneath the mask we knew that they were different people. But this is harsh language coming from Jesus.

The Jewish leaders who pray in public to show how holy and pious they were reveal themselves to be nothing more than actors.

[5 : 07] According to Jesus, the Pharisees didn't care about God listening to their prayers as much as they cared about looking holy in public. They had forgotten God's command to be holy as I am holy.

They decided to reinterpret that as appear holy as I appear holy. But as always, God doesn't look at appearances.

God looks at the heart. And then Jesus hammers his point home. Truly I say to you, they have received their reward. Now, what does he mean by that?

Well, the religious leaders were not motivated by obedience. They were motivated by attention. Man's approval is what they are after and that's whose approval they will get.

You're doing this for the attention of people. You got your reward. It's in full. You'll receive no other rewards from your father in heaven because you wanted the rewards just from people.

[6 : 19] But Jesus tells us that when we pray with a sincere heart and when we do that, that's showing that we acknowledge that we are dependent on him. God hears us and he will reward us.

Verse 6, but when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your father who is in secret and your father who sees in secret will reward you.

Now, we've got to be careful not to overstate the point here. Jesus is not criticizing public prayer in general. We have prayed publicly three times already this morning and I still have a clear conscience that we are not violating this text here.

Think about Daniel as well. He prayed earnestly every day and then when prayer was outlawed, you might recall, he continued to pray with his windows wide open.

But he didn't do it for show. This was bold authenticity. Daniel loved the Lord and no one was going to scare him out of glorifying God in prayer.

[7 : 28] And that's true of us as well. Our lives as Christians must not be a secret. In fact, earlier in the same sermon, Jesus says this in Matthew 5, you are the light of the world.

A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand and it gives light to all in the house.

In the same way, let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

See, there's the difference. Putting on a show so that you are seen by others or letting your light shine so that God receives glory.

As always, God looks at the heart. and our hearts are tested when we are alone. Because a Christian who is only a Christian outwardly is no Christian at all.

[8 : 39] It's an actor wearing a mask. When no one else sees you pray, will you still spend time with your Father? He delights in spending time with you.

And here's a comforting truth. Some of you might think, I'm not very good at praying. Well, God doesn't command that you are skilled at praying.

Isn't that comforting? God doesn't command that we are skilled at praying. Listen to some of these short and to-the-point prayers recorded in Scripture. The tax collector in Jesus' parable.

God, be merciful to me, a sinner. Or the thief on the cross next to Jesus. Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

Do you know how the Lord responded to that prayer? He said this, truly I say to you, you will be with me in paradise today. Isn't that comforting?

[9 : 46] to see the Lord accept these simple, short, and sincere prayers? Could you pray like that? Of course you could.

And if you aren't in the habit of praying, perhaps you could start by praying these very words from the depths of your soul. God, be merciful to me, a sinner. Jesus, remember me in your kingdom.

When you don't know what to pray, pray the classics. Okay, it's time to talk about pie. Not the number, but the dessert.

Do any of you eat pie? Any flavors that are your favorites? Let's hear some. Pumpkin pie, seasonal. I like that. Chocolate pie.

That's good. Any others? Banana cream pie, blueberry pie, key lime, apple, strawberry. That's a lot of good pies.

[10:50] That's a lot of good pies. That should be just the rest of our time together, just yelling out types of pies. Are any of you familiar with the name Marie Callender?

Okay. Oh, yes. Way more enthusiastic than I thought that was going to be. Okay, so for those of you who do not know, she was a pie maker who sold her homemade pies to local restaurants. And she gained quite a reputation for herself. In fact, her homemade pie business grew into a high-speed factory operation, which now, today, can make 210,000 pies per day. And even though they still bear Marie Callender's name, no one in his right mind would think that these frozen pies measure up to the originals. Herein lies the lesson. We have a tendency to take something authentic and good and reduce it to a cold, loveless formula.

[12:00] And don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that Marie Callender only baked one good pie one time. I'm sure that when she made her pies by hand, they were fantastic, even if she made them every single day.

But when you replace the passionate work of an artist with cold, unfeeling copies, the heart is lost and the value is cheapened.

ask any baker what the secret ingredient is that makes the food taste so good, what will they say? It's love. You said it, right?

Absolutely. No frozen factory pie can replace the authentic original that was made with love. And prayer is like that. We can pray a known prayer many times and if our hearts are present, our minds are present, it can be an act of love.

[13:02] It can be a prayer that's pleasing to God. It's the cold, absent-minded repetition that Jesus rejects. Verse 7.

And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do for they think that they will be heard for their many words.

This is not authentic. It's a massive frozen pie operation. Making cold copy after cold copy without love, pretending that it is authentic.

And so it is with prayer. Just as Jesus wasn't condemning all public prayer, he's not condemning all repeated prayer.

On the contrary, Jesus teaches his followers the Lord's prayer in more than one place. And he was well acquainted with the repeated prayers and proclamations of his own people.

[14:05] Here's an example. The Shema, for those of you familiar, the Shema from Deuteronomy 6 that starts with Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one, and so on.

This was said by Jews every night and every morning, including during Jesus' lifetime on earth. This proclamation was near and dear to him.

In fact, when he was asked about the greatest commandment in Mark 12, Jesus answered, the most important is, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. Very familiar language. Apparently, repetition itself isn't the problem. So, what are these Gentile practices that Jesus is talking about?

Here's one example. There was a military man who lived around the same time as Jesus, a Roman scholar named Pliny the Elder.

[15:15] Pliny the Elder. And in the year 77 A.D., he wrote his most famous work called Natural History. And his teachings on prayer in Book 28, Chapter 4, seemed to fit the Gentile rituals that Jesus condemns.

Pliny the Elder argued that the pagan gods were influenced by, quote, set forms of words. In discussing whether words and incantations have any power or not, Pliny the Elder said that his fellow Romans saw, and here's the quote, our supreme magistrates use certain formulas for their prayers that not a single word may be omitted or pronounced out of its place.

Now, just picture this. It is the duty of one person to precede the dignitary by reading the formula before him from a written ritual, of another to keep watch upon every word, and of a third to see that silence is not ominously broken, while a musician in the meantime is performing on the flute to prevent any other words being heard.

Can you picture this? That is multiple people to make sure that this one prayer is said exactly right. The Romans were convinced that their prayers were influenced, had influenced their gods if they were recited with perfect accuracy, and as long as it was quiet enough for the gods to hear each

word along with a flute.

Now, that may sound odd, but ritualistic prayer is more common than we think. I think of my Muslim friends who are required to complete their five daily prayers.

[17 : 11] They must be recited word for word in Arabic, even though most Muslims in the world neither speak or understand Arabic. This is literally heaping up empty phrases thinking that they will be heard for their many words.

But before we get too judgmental, here's a Christian example that might hit closer to home. How many of you are familiar with this sinner's prayer? It goes a little bit like this, Lord Jesus, I know I'm a sinner.

I believe you died for my sins so that I could be forgiven. I receive you as my Lord and Savior. Thank you for coming into my life. Amen. Now, I'm sure the first time a Christian uttered those words, it was sincere.

From the heart, it was warm and authentic like a homemade pie. And yet, this prayer has been stripped of its sincerity and has been manufactured for repetition.

Over and over, this prayer has been treated as a phrase to heap up at God with the expectation that he will reward empty words with eternal salvation.

[18 : 24] Are we like Pliny the Elder? Are we convinced that a careful recitation of certain words with no heart is pleasing to God? It is not.

On a personal note, many of you know that I was Catholic throughout my younger years. I made it a point to go to confession on Saturdays. I would tell my priest my various sins of the week.

And then he would assign me a short list of prayers to say directly following my confession.

Generally, I was told to say a few Hail Marys, which are prayers to Mary, not God, and a few prayers called the Our Father.

And the message to me was this, say these words in this order and God will reward you. Do you hear the problem? And here's the fun part.

The Our Father that I was told to repeat a few times to obtain forgiveness, that's the Lord's Prayer. Isn't that unbelievable?

[19 : 33] The very prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to pray instead of mindlessly repeating phrases became just that. Perhaps you catch the irony of that faster than I did.

because in verse 7, Jesus says, And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words.

And then shortly thereafter, in verse 9, Jesus says, Pray then like this, Our Father in heaven, and goes on to teach the Lord's Prayer. So I had taken a beautiful prayer taught by Jesus himself and I turned it into an empty, repetitious phrase that he hates.

A different Catholic discovered this irony 500 years before I did. A man by the name of Martin Luther. He loved the Lord's Prayer.

Luther had a friend named Peter the Barber. He was a barber. And Peter the Barber asked Luther to teach him how to pray.

[20 : 49] And Luther pointed his friend Peter to the Lord's Prayer. This is how you pray. But he also warned him about the dangers of heaping up empty phrases at God.

Luther said this about the Lord's Prayer. It is surely evident that a real master composed and taught it. What a great pity that the prayer of such a master is prattled and chattered so irreverently all over the world.

How many prayed the Lord's Prayer several thousand times in the course of a year and if they were to keep on doing so for a thousand years, they would not have tasted nor prayed one iota, one dot of it.

In a word, the Lord's Prayer is the greatest martyr on earth as are the name and word of God.

Everybody tortures and abuses it. Few take comfort and joy in its proper use. If you don't know how to pray, pray the Lord's Prayer.

[22 : 05] Jesus himself taught us. Pray it every day. That is okay. But beware. We have a tendency to take something that's authentic and good and reduce it into a cold, loveless formula.

worship cannot be robbed of its sincerity. So maybe you're like me and you know that your time in prayer could stand to grow.

Or maybe you're telling yourself that this isn't a problem for you and you know that you aren't in the habit of praying scripted prayers over and over. That's good. Here's a different question.

How about music? You can ask yourself, have I sung songs in church without thinking about the words that I'm singing?

We miss out on beautiful worship when our hearts aren't in it. What a wasted opportunity to connect with our God and to bless his holy name when we're not present present in the things that we are doing.

[23 : 22] Verse 8, Do not be like them for your father knows what you need before you ask him. That statement alone should spark a flame within you to pray more often.

Your father knows what you need before you ask him. My brothers and my sisters, I want to end with this.

Your heavenly father loves you. He loves you so much that he gave his only son. And without Jesus, we have no right to draw near the throne of God in prayer.

sin separates us from God. But if you are a Christian, you really have had all of your sins forgiven. And so it's time to reap this benefit of your salvation. You can pray and God hears you. We are no longer separated.

[24 : 43] Because of Jesus, the Lamb of God, he's actually called the curtain who was torn. Jesus is called that.

The curtain who was torn. You know, we've talked about that before. That the curtain separated sinful people from a holy God. And Jesus is called the curtain who was torn.

So because of his sacrifice, we are no longer separated from God. God. This was actually part of our call to worship this morning.

And I want to read it one more time. It's from Hebrews 4 verse 16. Listen to these words. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

this is an invitation to pray. And we can accept that invitation every single day. Let's do that now.

[25 : 49] Let's pray. Father, we recognize that this time of prayer is a gift and it is a benefit of the salvation that you have given to us.

Because of our Savior Jesus, our High Priest, we get to stand before you with boldness knowing that our sins are forgiven and you invite us to come to you to receive mercy and to find grace.

Father, we also acknowledge that there are times that we fall into the trap that we just read about. We know, Lord, you know our hearts and we know that there are times that we are not present in our own prayer, in our own worship.

we also ask that you would prevent us from doing things that you call us to do but only for show.

[27 : 08] Please take that temptation away from all of us to act like a follower of Jesus in public and in private be a total hypocrite.

help us, Lord, because as we sang this morning, prone to wander, Lord, I feel it.

Prone to leave the God I love. But Lord, you tell us that no one can snatch us out of your hand. So hold us close.

Keep us in step with your spirit. take away our desires to do things that are not pleasing to you and grow in us a stronger faith and a desire to follow these commands of our Savior Jesus.

It's in his holy name that we pray. Amen.